Comment: *US Visas*

The Hallé Orchestra withdrew from its engagement to play two concerts next year, one due to take place in New York at the Lincoln Center, because acquiring the appropriate visas to enter the United States would have cost more than the fees they were to be paid.

The 80 members of the Hallé, plus 20 support staff, all of course based in Manchester, each would have to apply for a visa in person at the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square. To get the right kind of visa each person would have had to complete the necessary papers electronically, then make his or her own separate appointment, by telephone, on the line that costs £1.30 a minute. The forms cannot be filled in any other way than electronically. A glance at the Embassy website soon diverts you to the numerous new agencies that have sprung up, offering to fill in the forms for you, at a (quite reasonable) price. The voice that answers the telephone — estuary English — sounds loath to grant you an appointment. Appointments are during normal office hours, obviously, at their convenience in the next week or ten days. There is no point in arriving early. If you arrive late, for whatever reason, you have to renegotiate, again by telephone, from outside the Embassy. You must not have a bag, with books or sandwiches, though you are informed that you may have to wait. You don't have to enter the Embassy with your hands up but you certainly are made to feel you are suspected of being a potential terrorist.

The Hallé's finance people reckoned that it would cost £45,000 to pay for 100 visas ($100 each — about £65), return fares from Manchester Piccadilly to Euston and overnight hotel bills. If you live in Edinburgh or further north, and need the kind of visa that allows you to earn taxable income in the United States, the trip to London will obviously cost you that much more — perhaps two nights.

There is no way for a British citizen to get this kind of visa except by attending for interview, estimated to take half an hour, including finger printing etc., at the Embassy in London — unless you live in Northern Ireland, where the facility is available in Belfast.

The American Consulate General in Edinburgh offers help for US citizens in difficulties in Scotland, having lost their credit cards or had them stolen, and suchlike; but, in a cost cutting round in the early Clinton era, the fine house on Regent Terrace lost its facility for granting visas or indeed of being much help to anyone wanting to visit the United States.

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The Hallé Orchestra's chief executive asked why the visas couldn't be arranged in Manchester — but only Grosvenor Square has the high-speed lines to send the 'biometric data' over to Washington, he was told by the US consul-general in Manchester: 'We are all paying a cost because of terrorism'.

Indeed. Of course if you are not going to the United States to earn money — if you go on holiday or to buy your Christmas presents or visit the Elvis shrine or attend an academic event like a conference or even transact some minor piece of business — you get in — still — on the strength of the visa-waiver form that you fill in on the flight. Since the Patriot Act there is a new paragraph, in tiny print, on the visa waiver form, saying that every UK citizen may use the waiver *except* for members of terrorist organizations, former Nazis and journalists. Since you may stay for three months and go anywhere within the United States, the point about journalists, presumably, is that they might slip in on the visa-waiver programme and start poking into sensitive political and security matters, — so they need to be interviewed in London and checked out with Washington, before they travel. What you do if you are a former Nazi I don't know.

Having a visa, as it says on the document, is no guarantee that you will be allowed through passport control. That remains, as it says, entirely up to the individual US immigration man or woman at the desk whether to let you in. They seldom look you in the eye, they turn the pages of your passport suspiciously, and you need a ready answer if they snap out at you 'What's your business, sir, in the United States?' — 8 or 9 hours non-stop in cattle class probably makes you look witless enough to have been on the wrong flight.

Take care, we are all paying a cost. Think twice about going at all.

Fergus Kerr OP

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